



# WAS IT WRONG TO DROP THE ATOM BOMB ON JAPAN?

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President Harry S. Truman's decision to use atomic weapons against the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki proved to be one of the most controversial decisions in American history.

As the years have passed, the controversy has only intensified. More and more people -- both in America and abroad -- have condemned both President Truman and America for that decision.

But this criticism is based on limited historical knowledge of both the situation Truman confronted and the basis for his decision. Such flawed analysis has been aided by the unfortunate influence of some very bad history, such as that written by members of the so-called "atomic diplomacy" school. These historians disgracefully alleged that Truman proceeded to drop two atomic bombs on a Japan, which he knew was on the verge of surrender, so as to intimidate the Soviet Union in the already developing Cold War. That specious interpretation must be refuted fully.

Truman sought to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two major military/industrial targets, to avoid an invasion of Japan, which Truman knew would mean, in his words, quote, "an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other," end quote. His assumptions were entirely legitimate.

By July of 1945 the Japanese had been subjected to months of devastating attacks by American B-29s, their capital and other major cities had suffered extensive damage, and the home islands were subjected to a naval blockade that made food and fuel increasingly scarce. Japanese military and civilian losses had reached approximately three million and there seemed no end in sight. Despite all this, however, Japan's leaders and especially its military clung fiercely to notions of Ketsu-Go ("decisive battle"). In fact, the Japanese government had mobilized a large part of the population into a national militia which would be deployed to defend the home islands.

Confirming the Japanese determination to fight on is the fact that even after the use of atomic bombs against both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese military still wanted to pursue that desperate option. The atomic bombs forced Emperor Hirohito to understand clearly, and in a way his military leaders refused to comprehend, that the defense of the homeland was hopeless. It took the unprecedented intervention of a Japanese emperor to break the impasse in the Japanese government and finally order surrender. It was only the dropping of the atom bombs that allowed the emperor and the so-called peace faction in the Japanese government to negotiate an end to the war.

All the viable alternate scenarios to secure American victory – all would have meant significantly greater American and allied casualties and much higher Japanese civilian and military casualties. According to American military estimates at the time, those numbers would have been well above one million.

Hard as it may be to accept, Japanese losses would have been far greater without the bombs. And the overall casualties would also have included thousands of Allied prisoners of war whom the Japanese planned to execute in case of invasion.

Truman's use of the bomb should be seen as his choosing the least awful of the options available to him.

Even in retrospect, far removed from the pressures that Truman faced in 1945, his critics can offer no serious and convincing proposal regarding a viable and less costly alternative.

The judgment of history is clear and unambiguous: the atomic bombs shortened the war, averted the need for a land invasion, saved countless more lives on both sides of the blood-soaked conflict than they cost, and ended the Japanese brutalization of the conquered peoples of Asia.

Given the alternatives, what would any moral person have done in Truman's position?

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